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Hampton manager again seeks budget input

Feb. 18, 2014 - City Manager Mary Bunting will once again ask Hampton residents to give input on what they'd like to see in – or out of – the city's next budget. Outreach and input sessions will be held beginning Feb. 25.

After four earlier years of input, Bunting has a pretty good idea of how the citizens value city services. Last year, more than 2,500 people offered their views. The result: After 4 years of significant budget cuts for both city and schools, close to 90% of those involved said it was time to adjust the tax rate to maintain existing city and school services and programs. In addition, most agreed that it was time to start investing to help the city reach strategic goals and the schools increase access to technology.

The full revenue picture isn't in yet, but the biggest portion of city revenues comes from property taxes, and taxable assessments are down 1.2%. In addition, both city and school operations are seeing expense increases due to factors outside their control. For the city, rising costs at the regional jail and other regional services are a factor, as are increases in retirement programs. The schools also face retirement increase, and at the same time, cuts in revenue from the state.

It's clear, said Bunting, that Hampton can't continue to cut its way out of annual budget gaps and provide the services residents value. She's focusing on strategies that will help the city grow its way out. Economic Development Director Leonard Sledge will join the input sessions to talk about recent successes and goals for attracting businesses and investment to Hampton.

Budget cuts would likely have to focus on services that residents rejected last year. Rather than poll on those same cuts, residents will be consulted this year on more strategic topics. For example, after last year's 20-cent tax rate increase – which still leaves most taxpayers paying less in real estate taxes than they did in in 2008 – do homeowners still agree that the rate should be adjusted annually to compensate for assessment changes? Although residents agreed that it was time to invest last year, do they still agree or would they suggest deferring some investments?

Hampton residents and businesses are invited to give their input during three forums:

- Tuesday, Feb. 25, from 6-8 p.m., at Jones Middle School, 1819 Nickerson Blvd.
- Thursday, Feb. 27, from 6-8 p.m. at Bethel High School, 1067 Big Bethel Rd.
- Saturday, March 1, from 9-11 a.m. at Hampton High School, 1491 W. Queen St.